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ABSTRACT

A study investigated differences in literacy teaching and learning between those classrooms following the "Literacy Initiative for Teachers" (LIFT) program and those using normal teaching techniques. A subsidiary aim was to document the staffing ratios throughout the day in the classrooms and the amount of time devoted to English. One Reception class was observed in each of 12 schools, 6 LIFT and 6 matched comparison schools. Results indicated differences in teaching and learning in LIFT classrooms. Taken together with the children's literacy outcomes, findings suggest that the more structured approach to the early teaching of reading has been effective. Furthermore, LIFT does not require extra staff. The organization and structure in the teaching of reading is more important than devoting more time to literacy. The LIFT program did appear to change the way teachers teach literacy, and children engaged in more collaborative literacy learning. (Contains 1 table and 12 figures of data.) (RS)

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Observing Practice in the "Literacy Initiative for Teachers" (L.I.F.T.) and Comparison Classrooms.

by Kathy Sylva

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Observing practice in the 'Literacy Initiative for Teachers' (L.I.F.T.) and comparison classrooms

Kathy Sylva

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference
(September 11-14 1997: University of York)

Aims of observation

The main aim of the observations was to investigate differences in literacy teaching and learning between those classrooms following the 'Literacy Initiative for Teachers' (L.I.F.T.) programme and those using normal teaching techniques. A subsidiary aim was to document the staffing ratios throughout the day in the classrooms and the amount of time devoted to English.

Observation sample

One Reception class (or a class containing Reception aged children) was observed in each of the twelve schools participating in the study, six L.I.F.T. and six matched comparison schools.

Children in each of the selected classes were observed during three half days. On each half day the researchers observed for two hours, and in each hour three children were observed for 15 minutes each. In total, each classroom contributed 18 child observations to the analyses. In the schools following the L.I.F.T. programme, one hour of a L.I.F.T. literacy session was observed as well as one lesson of classroom teaching outside of L.I.F.T. The sample is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Observation Sample

	L.I.F.T.	Comparison
No. of classes	6	6
No. of children	108	108
No. of hours of observation	27	27

In the comparison schools, the class teacher was asked which three half days (normally in one week) would give a good example of their normal literacy programme. One of the two hours in each half day was during the teachers introduction of a literacy activity.

A list was made from the register of all the Reception children present in the class for that day. Only those children whose dates of birth fell between 1 September 1990 and 31 August 1991 were included. Children excluded from the sample were those who 1) had a SEN

statement, 2) spoke very little English, 3) started school less than two weeks previously, or 4) had special needs formally recognised by the school.

Five children were selected randomly from the amended class list. The sixth child was selected randomly from those working with the teacher during a literacy activity. This method of selecting the sixth child guaranteed at least one sustained episode devoted to literacy teaching.

Observation Procedure

The observation instrument was based on the Target Child Observation (Sylva, in press) but modified to focus on literacy behaviours by the author, Helen Mirrelman and Andrew Burrell. The observer sat on a low chair (or crouched) about 2 metres away from the child to be as unobtrusive as possible whilst still being able to hear. The observer focused on one child at a time (the 'target' child) for 15 minutes, then turned to the next child in the sample. The teacher's behaviour was coded in so far as s/he interacted with each focal child, either individually or in a group. This observational method is rarely threatening to teachers because they realise that the observer's focus is on the child's learning. The observers had a clipboard with lined sheets, each interval devoted to a 30 second record. Using a bleep in the ear they began a record, moving every 30 seconds to a fresh line on the recording paper. The observer made a note of the child's 'learning activity' and also the teacher's 'teaching behaviour' on offer to the child. The observer also noted how many children and adults were in the room at the time and the curriculum subject in which that child engaged and the classroom organisation, e.g. small groups or whole class. All classroom details were coded for each 30 second interval.

Coding Categories

The information on the observation sheets was transferred onto a compact coding sheet before statistical analysis.

The *Curriculum setting* was a general description of the subject covered in each particular lesson. Curriculum subjects were coded separately but for the purpose of analysis they were grouped as follows: 1) English, 2) Maths/ Science/ Technology, and 3) Art/ Design/ Personal and Social Education/ Music/ Geography/ History/ Play/ Other.

The *Organisational Setting* described the child's immediate teaching environment. There were six separate codes corresponding to 1) the child working alone, 2) working in a pair, 3) working in a small interactive group of seven or less, 4) working in a large interactive group of eight or more, 5) working in a group or a pair but not interacting, and 6) whole class activity.

Note was made of the precise number of adults in the room throughout the observations. If the number of adults or children varied during the 15 minute session then the average during that 15 minute observation was used in the analysis.

The *Adult Teaching* Codes describe the behaviour of the adult (usually the teacher) to the child. The main activity, e.g. reading aloud to the class, was recorded as the 'main behaviour'.

If the adult engaged in a second teaching activity, e.g. asked a question to the focal child during reading, then this 'subsidiary behaviour' was also coded. Eleven distinct activities were distinguished and consisted of:

1) absent (if the teacher was not near or interacting with the focal child)
2) present (but not interacting with the focal child)
3) acting in a physically caring manner

4) teacher praise
5) managing activities
6) questioning
7) using questions and answers to instruct
8) instruction of a didactic kind
9) extending child's learning though examples or suggestions
10) observing
11) reading

The *Children's Learning Activity* Codes were finely differentiated. The child's activity was coded as one of forty different activities which have been grouped below into nine related areas (see appendix 1). The forty categories were analysed separately in statistical tests.

READING: 1) reading to the teacher (text), 2) reading to the teacher (individual words), 3) reading to another child, 4) reading to/with a group, and 5) reading on his/her own.

LOOKING AT / SHARING BOOKS (not sustained reading): 1) looking at books, 2) sharing published books, and 3) sharing class-made books.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS ACTIVITIES: 1) phonological awareness activities.

LISTENING TO TEACHER: 1) listening to teacher read, 2) listening to teacher question, 3) listening to teacher instruct, 4) listening to teacher using questions to instruct, and 5) listening to teacher manage.

LISTENING ACTIVITIES: 1) listening to tapes containing literacy instructional material, 2) listening to other tapes, 3) listening to child read, and 4) listening to others speaking on task.

REPLYING: 1) replying to questions.

WRITING: 1) writing (copy or trace), 2) writing (invented or own), and 3) sharing writing.

NUMBERS, COMPUTERS, NUMBER GAMES: 1) number work, 2) games (other), and 3) computer (other activities).

LITERACY PLAY: 1) games (reading), 2) computer (literacy activities), and 3) singing songs and sequences.

DRAWING, OTHER PLAY, CONVERSATION: 1) drawing and colouring, 2) cutting/pasting/painting, 3) play, and 4) conversation.

MOVEMENT: 1) general movement, 2) purposeful movement, and 3) wandering.

OBSERVE, WAIT, DOMESTIC: 1) observing (purpose unknown), 2) observing others within task, 3) observing others off task, 4) waiting, and 5) domestic activity

such as washing hands.

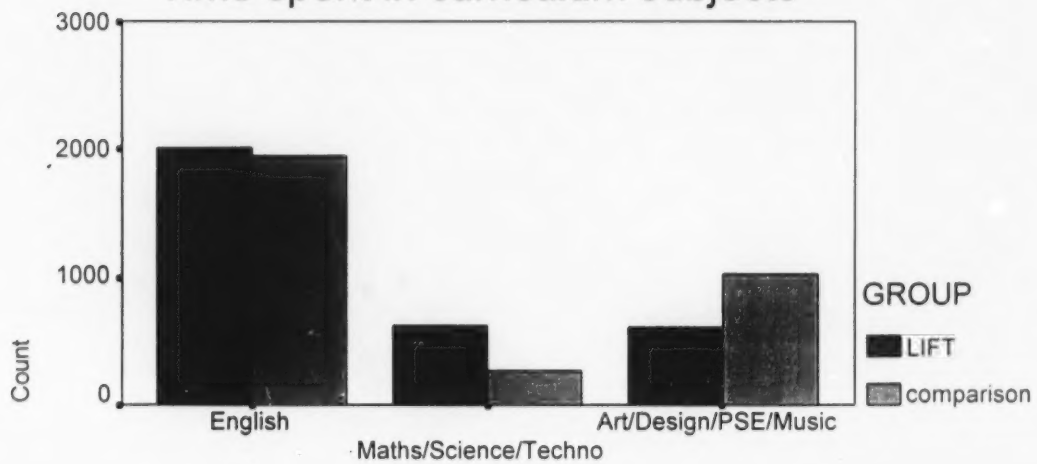
Results

Curriculum setting

Each of the categories were compared to determine differences in the amount of time devoted to different areas of the curriculum in the L.I.F.T. and comparison groups (see Figure 1). There was no difference in the amount of time spent learning English (Mann-Whitney U=5515.0: p=0.47), but L.I.F.T. schools spent significantly more time learning Maths/ Science/ Technology (Mann-Whitney U=5097.0: p=0.0217) and less time learning the other

Figure 1:

Time spent in curriculum subjects

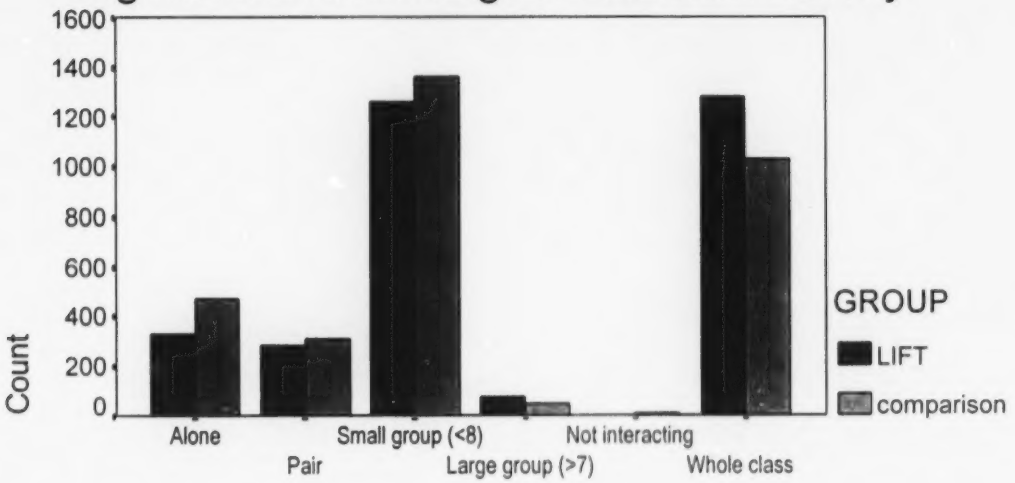


subjects (Mann-Whitney U=4731.5: p=0.0103).

Organisational setting

Statistical tests were used to compare L.I.F.T. and comparison schools for each setting but no differences were found. In other words, the L.I.F.T. programme is not significantly different in its use of individual, small group or whole class teaching. There was more whole class teaching in L.I.F.T. schools but the difference in this sample is not significant (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Organisational setting of children's activity



Number of adults

The mean number of adults present in the classroom in L.I.F.T. and comparison schools was not significantly different (Mann-Whitney U=5547.5: p=0.50).

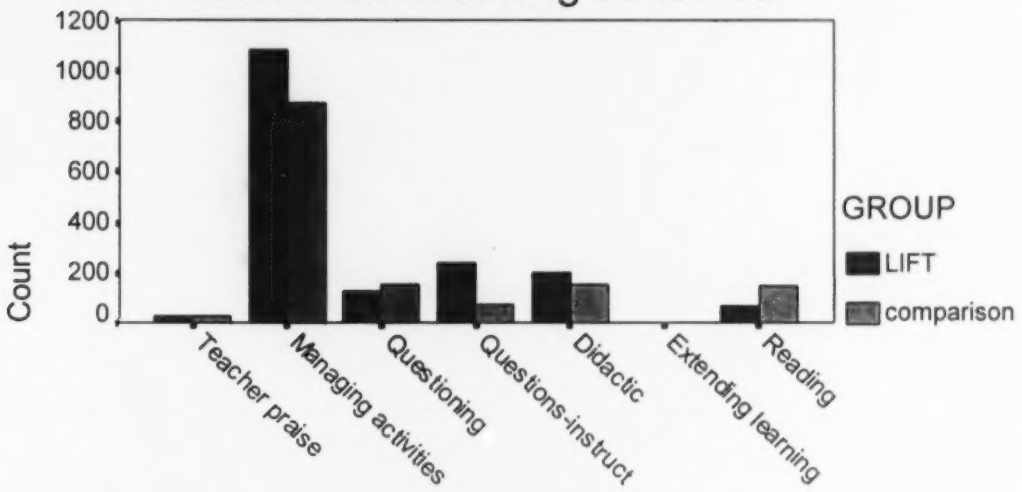
Number of children

There was no difference between the mean number of children present in the classroom in L.I.F.T. and comparison schools excluding an outlier of 60 - probably due to a period consisting of two classes joined together(Mann-Whitney U=5760.0: p=0.87).

Adults teaching behaviours

To use all of the data, the three categories of adults (teachers, other school staff, non-school adults) were combined to provide an overall indication of the teaching behaviours for all adults interacting with the child during the lesson (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3:
Adult direct teaching behaviour

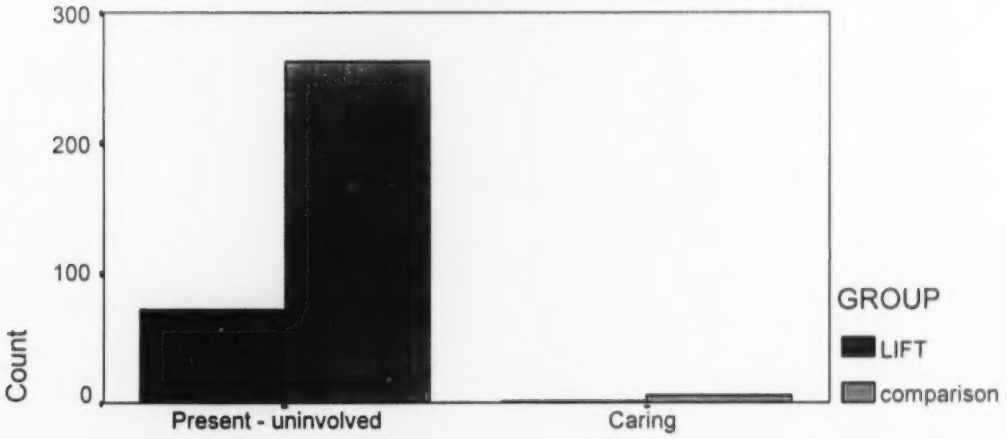


Of the seven codes for teaching instructions, three revealed significant differences between L.I.F.T. and comparison schools. These were:

Teachers in L.I.F.T. schools were more likely to use direct teaching. For example, they used more questions to instruct (Mann-Whitney U=4107.0: $p<0.0001$) such as 'What do you think happened next?'.

L.I.F.T. teachers were more likely to manage activities (Mann-Whitney U=4698.0: $p=0.0134$) than comparison teachers. This included setting up the groups activities and checking to ensure that group members knew how to carry out their task.

Figure 4:
Other adult behaviours



Teachers in the Comparison schools were more likely to be near-but-not-interacting (present) with pupils than teachers in the L.I.F.T. classrooms. L.I.F.T. teachers tended to be actively teaching or interacting with children when they were with them (Mann-Whitney U=4415.5: p=0.0007). 'Teachers observing' was seen too infrequently for any comparison to be made.

Physically caring actions were found less often in L.I.F.T. schools (Mann-Whitney U=5452.0: p=0.0298), confirming a greater focus on educating children in L.I.F.T. classrooms.

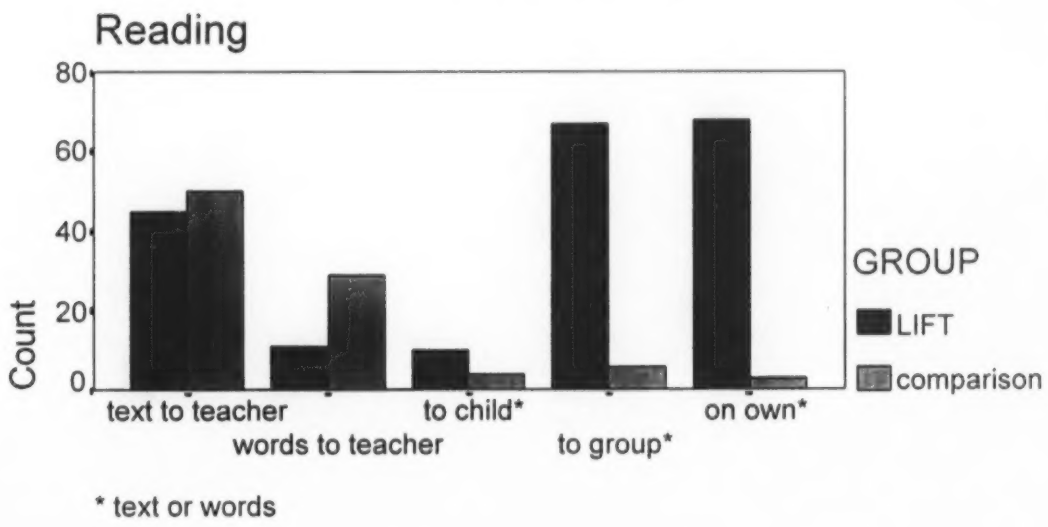
Children's learning activities

There were many differences between the L.I.F.T. and non-L.I.F.T. schools in the children's learning activities. In many ways these confirm the greater emphasis on direct teaching behaviours discussed above. However the observations revealed a more collaborative learning in L.I.F.T. classrooms, an unexpected finding.

Reading

Children in L.I.F.T. classes were significantly more likely to read to another child (Mann-Whitney U=5511.5: p=0.0329), read to the group (Mann-Whitney U=4972.5: p=0.0001), or read on their own (Mann-Whitney U=5223.0: p=0.0045)(see Figure 5). However there were no significant differences between L.I.F.T. and comparison classes in children reading to teachers (either text or words).

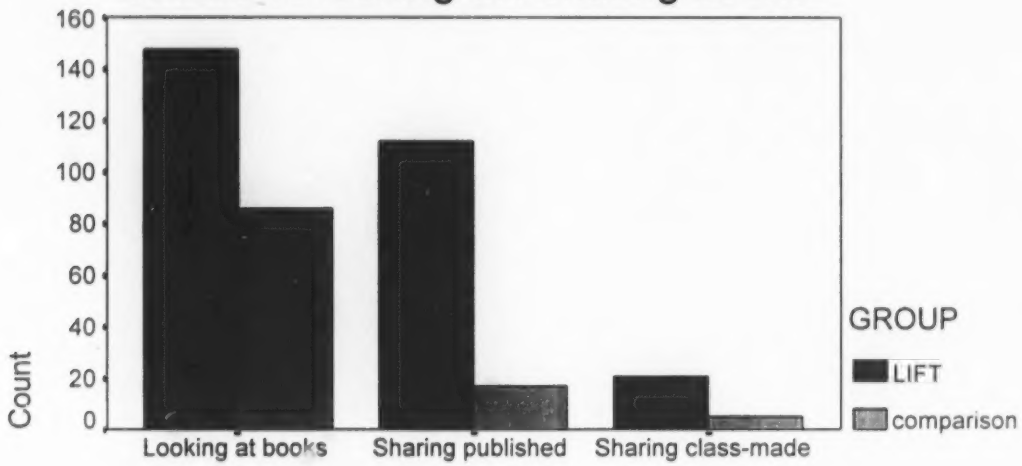
Figure 5:
Children's reading



Looking at / sharing books (not sustained reading)

L.I.F.T. children were more likely to share published books (Mann-Whitney: p=0.0025)(see Figure 6).

Figure 6:
Children's looking at / sharing books



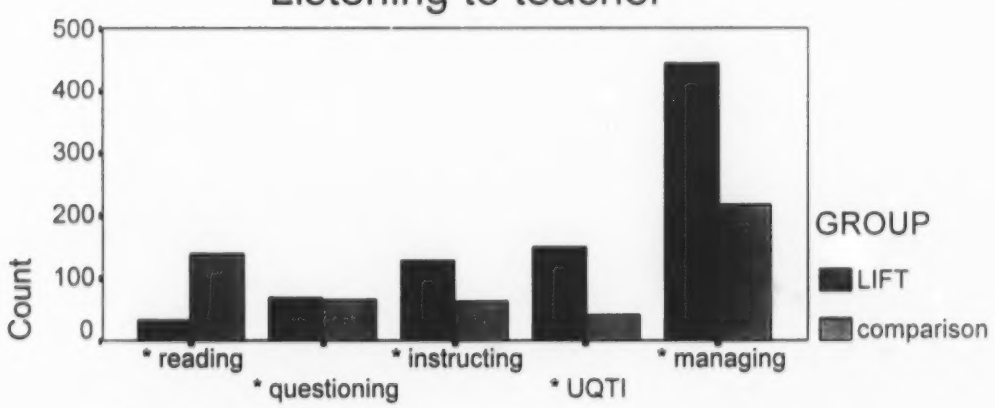
Phonological awareness activities

There were no differences between the two groups in this activity.

Listening to teacher

Children in L.I.F.T. classes spent more time listening to adults instructing and managing (see Figure 7). Specifically, children in L.I.F.T. spent more time listening to the teacher instruct (Mann-Whitney U=4653.5: p=0.0036), listening to the teacher instruct with questions (Mann-Whitney U=4343.0: p=0.0001), and listening to the teacher manage (Mann-Whitney

Figure 7:
Listening to teacher



*listening to teacher

UQTI - using questions to instruct

U=3083.5: p<0.0001). All of the above were statistically significant.

Other listening

There were no differences between the two groups in these activities.

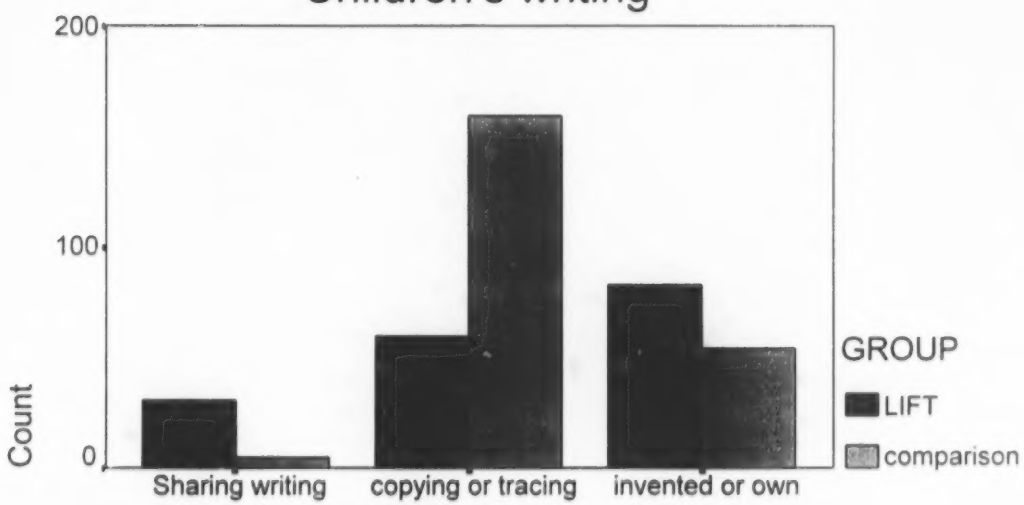
Replying

There were no differences between the two groups in replying to teacher's questions although it should be remembered that L.I.F.T. teachers asked different kinds of questions (to instruct).

Writing

Children in L.I.F.T. classrooms were more likely to be sharing writing (Mann-Whitney U=5131.5: p=0.0011) but less likely to be copying and tracing (Mann-Whitney: p=0.0162)

Figure 8:
Children's writing



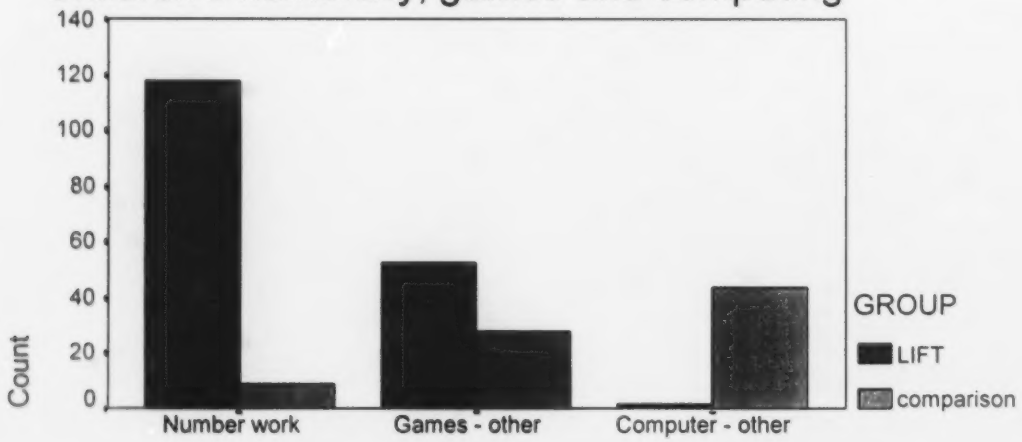
than children in comparison classrooms (see Figure 8).

Numbers, computers, number games

Number work (Mann-Whitney U=4972.0: p=0.0002) was found significantly more often in L.I.F.T. classrooms but computer activities outside literacy (Mann-Whitney U=5506.0: p=0.0300) were found significantly more often in comparison classrooms (see Figure 9).

Figure 9:

Children's numeracy, games and computing



Literacy play

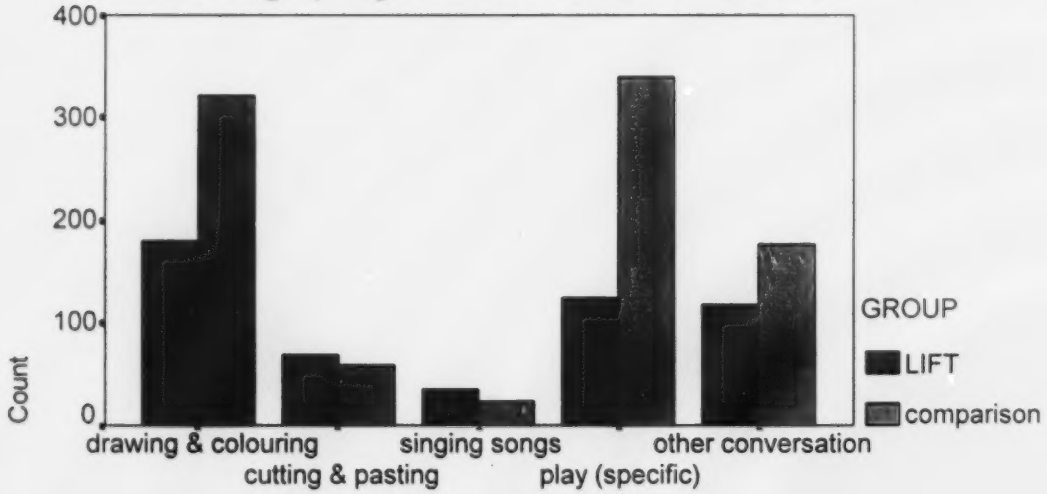
There were no differences between the two groups in these activities.

Drawing, other play, conversation

Drawing and colouring (Mann-Whitney U=4958.5: p=0.0203) and Play (Mann-Whitney U=4674.0: p=0.0006) were not seen as much in L.I.F.T. classrooms as in comparison classrooms (see Figure 10).

Figure 10:

Drawing, play and other conversation



Movement

General classroom movement (Mann-Whitney U=5402.0: p=0.0183) was found less in L.I.F.T. classrooms again confirming the greater task orientation of this classroom

programme (see Figure 11).

Observe, wait, domestic

Observing others within a task (Mann-Whitney U=4606.5: p=0.0018) and domestic activity (Mann-Whitney U=5265.0: p=0.0372) were found less within the L.I.F.T. environment (see

Figure 11:
Children's movement

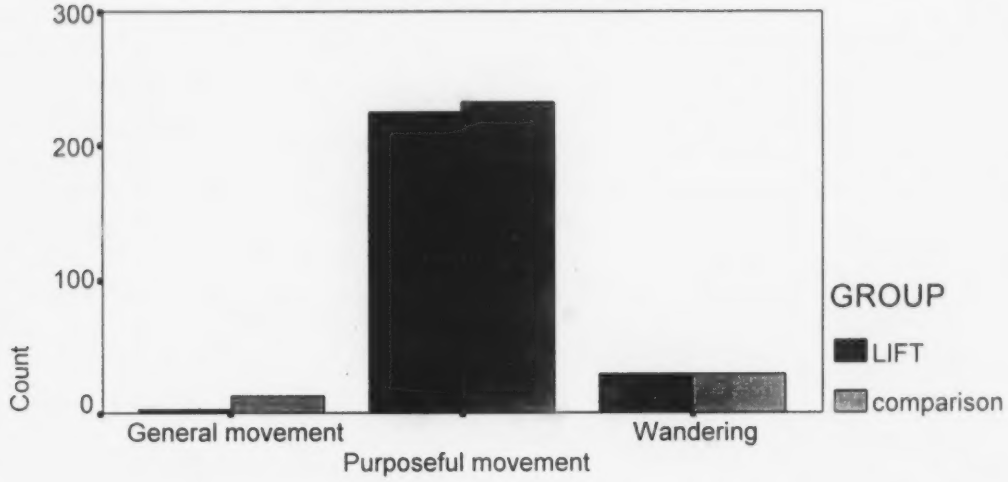
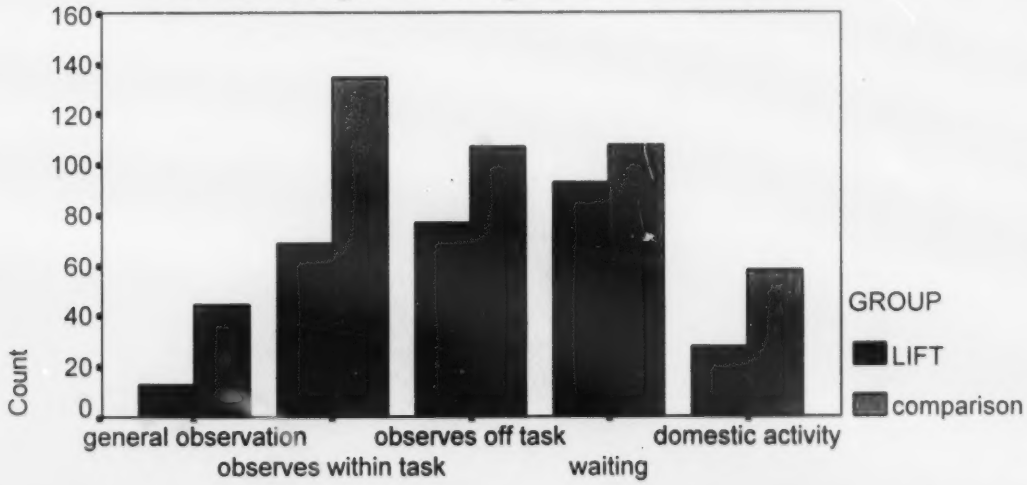


Figure 12). This confirms the qualitative finding that children in L.I.F.T. concentrated more on the curriculum.

Discussion

Figure 12:
Observing, waiting and Domestic



Children in L.I.F.T. classrooms on average made more progress in literacy during the course

of about six months than their peers in other Westminster schools.

The systematic observations revealed differences in teaching and learning in L.I.F.T. classrooms. Taken together with the children's literacy outcomes, these findings suggest that the more structured approach to the early teaching of reading has been effective. Furthermore L.I.F.T. does not require extra staff; as there was no observed difference in the staff pupil ratios or the classroom size. There was also no difference in the amount of time devoted to the teaching of English in L.I.F.T. classrooms. This important finding suggests that organisation and structure in the teaching of reading is more important than devoting more time to literacy. It also makes it less likely that L.I.F.T. children's gains in literacy were achieved at the expense of their progress in other basic skills.

There were many differences in curriculum management and adult teaching behaviours. The children observed in L.I.F.T. classrooms did more science and mathematics during the sessions observed, although no more English, suggesting a stronger orientation to core subjects. In L.I.F.T. classrooms teachers used more guided instruction to promote problem solving approaches to reading. One of the ways they did this was through instructing children through questions.

Teachers were very active in the groups, working individually and with all the children together. At times when groups were operating on their own, children continued their focus on literacy through reading on their own or to the group without the teacher present. This required great skill at classroom management, and teachers spent more time talking to children about what they were to do next and why (teacher behaviour: manage / child learning activity: listening to teacher's management talk).

Children also behaved differently. Overall children in L.I.F.T. devoted more time to reading but their greater involvement in reading stems from reading to other children and on their own rather than reading to the teacher. They were also more likely to write or listen and less likely to be performing non-academic actions such as playing or moving around. A striking finding is that children in the L.I.F.T. classrooms engaged more in collaborative learning; they were more likely to read to another child, read aloud to their small group and to share writing with peers.

There is compelling evidence that differences in classroom behaviour are due to the L.I.F.T. programme as 1) the schools were carefully matched to take into account any intake or facilities bias, 2) no more time was spent on English.

The L.I.F.T. programme does appear to change the way teachers teach literacy - with L.I.F.T. teachers managing learning more closely and instructing more. It also changes the way children learn; they engage in more collaborative literacy learning. It is our impression that the classrooms in the L.I.F.T. programme had much more in common with each other than was the case with the comparison schools. Even when working to a shared National Curriculum and within a relatively small geographical area, within one LEA, teachers' delivery is remarkable diverse at the classroom level.

As a result of the L.I.F.T. programme, Reception children make greater progress in literacy. It would be unwise to conclude that the success of L.I.F.T. lies only in direct teaching on the part of adults or indeed on collaborative learning. Good literacy programmes are more

complex than this. Children appeared to learn much while working on well defined tasks in small groups, including reading to one another. The composition of the groups and the books that they read were informed by appropriate assessment of children's reading skills. The nature of the curriculum, with its heavy emphasis on reading and a whole language approach (confirmed by the significantly greater time L.I.F.T. children spent interacting with books) is also central to the programmes. The L.I.F.T. programme involves not only structuring the classroom programme but also effectively structuring the learning resources, such as books, and in most cases increasing the learning resources. The importance, for example, of 'group books'; sets of six so all can work together, is critical. Within this context, the literacy-focussed teacher does seem to produce more literacy focused children, who read more and wander about and play less. The children in this environment make more progress in literacy.

However, changing the classroom programme has resource implications, especially if a whole language approach is used which relies on good quality reading material. But after the initial purchase of books and the outlay on training, the L.I.F.T. programme should be no more expensive than other classroom approaches because it does not require extra staff.

In conclusion, it does seem to be possible to increase the balance of direct instruction and structure within classroom literacy programmes without holding to a narrow skills-based curriculum. In the case of L.I.F.T., this has been achieved in a real life setting through in-service education. This in turn leads to greater progress in children's learning.

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